

DARRYL STINGLEY

...10 Years Later



The victim in one of football's worst tragedies carries on heroically/**See page 6**

COVER STORY

Darryl Stingley's 2nd Life

10 Years After Crippling, He Competes 'to Beat What I Am Up Against'

By PAUL ATTNER
National Correspondent

CHICAGO—Darryl Stingley sat passively in his wheelchair, watching the images flickering across the television set.

"There, that's when he should have thrown the ball," he said suddenly. "Right there."

On the screen, a New England Patriots wide receiver wearing No. 84 broke open as he began his cut across the middle of the field. But the pass didn't come, and the receiver continued to run. He finally turned and saw the football flying high over his head. He leaped, extending his body to full length, and tried to pull in the ball with one hand, but it flew past him and bounced harmlessly in the secondary.

That's when the Oakland Raiders' free safety, moving at full speed, made contact with No. 84, jamming his forearm and body into the receiver's neck and slamming him to the ground. You could almost hear the TV announcers muttering in admiration of the sledgehammer tackle.

"That's classic Jack Tatum," they probably said. "What an intimidating hit."

But on this late summer afternoon in Chicago, there was no sound coming from the videotape. Just silence as Darryl Stingley watched the same play again and again. It never changed.

"It was a good hit," said Stingley, who, a decade before, had been that No. 84, floating vulnerably in the air, seeing the onrushing Tatum, trying to avoid the contact but failing tragically.

"For an instant before the tackle, I looked him dead straight in the eye and I tried to duck him. When it happened, I thought it was a pinched nerve. But I couldn't get up. I couldn't believe I couldn't get up."

He paused. "I didn't know it then, but before I hit the ground, my life had changed forever."

"It was one of those pass plays where I could have attempted to intercept, but because of what the owners expect of me when they give me my paycheck, I automatically reacted to the situation by going for an intimidating hit."

—Jack Tatum,

"They Call Me Assassin"

You enter the world of Darryl Stingley through a wide door that can be opened and shut by pressing on a button plate. He lives with Tina Newsome, the mother of his two teen-age children, in a smartly decorated 14th-floor apartment a block away from Lake Michigan. If you look between the buildings towering outside his front windows, you can catch glimpses of the sun glistening off the water.

It has been 10 years since that night of August 12, 1978, when Stingley's neck was broken by the force of Jack Tatum's tackle in a Patriots-Raiders preseason game in the Oakland Coliseum.

Officially, the fourth and fifth vertebrae of his spinal cord were

crushed by the blow. In reality, he left the field a quadriplegic, paralyzed from the neck down save for some movement in his right hand and arm.

It has been 10 years since doctors, at least twice, thought that Stingley would never leave the hospital alive. It has been 10 years since one frightening, vicious tackle polarized the world of pro football and forced everyone to look more closely at an often unnecessarily violent, frequently ruthless game.

But to Stingley, 10 years is a lifetime ago. In his apartment, where a machine lifts him out of bed in the morning and where humans must dress him, feed him and care for him daily, the world of pro football seems so far removed, so foreign, so out of place.

"Not so," said Stingley, sitting in his wheelchair, dressed in a blue Reebok sweatshirt with "Darryl" stitched across one pocket. "I'm still an athlete, I'm still competing. In my heart and mind, there is still a competitive spirit to beat what I am up against."

He still gets letters, 10 years after that night, from fans wanting to know how he is doing. When the accident first happened, people sent him money along with their prayers and sympathy. His family was shattered by the injury, friends abandoned him, Tina left him. He remembers waking up in the hospital in Oakland after the injury, hearing his relatives "carrying on and boo-hoing and all that," and thinking to himself, "I'm the one in trouble here, not them."



Darryl Stingley says he doesn't dwell on the hit (above) that left him permanently bound to a wheelchair.

But now, his family leans on him, absorbing some of the unending strength that carries him daily. His parents divorced after 30 years of marriage and his father now has lost a leg from severe diabetes. Stingley isn't sure how much longer his father will live. But when they talk, Darryl said, "My dad just refuses to give in. He says I didn't, so why should he?"

Fans write Stingley for comfort and advice. Many are also spinal cord injury victims, and he consoles them with his letters, trying to use his life as an example to give them hope.

He sits there, in his battery-operated wheelchair, maneuvering around an apartment full of push-buttons and specially designed equipment, and he laughs a lot and jokes and smiles when he has every right to be bitter.

Ten years ago, he was 26, in his sixth season with the Patriots, a budding All-Pro receiver on the verge of signing a new \$500,000, five-year guaranteed contract. If anything, he was too aggressive. He egotistically believed he could catch everything that came near him, even that overthrown pass in Oakland.

But if he is bitter, he hides it well.

"I've found it interesting to be Darryl Stingley since the accident," he said. "What my life has come to represent, the fact people look at me as quote, unquote, an inspiration."

"That has been the most rewarding aspect of this so-called second chance at life, that the whole thing didn't happen in vain, that I am able to touch people in such a way as to inspire them. When I didn't die in the hospital, I think God had a little something to do with that. Maybe He decided I should stick around, that He had something in mind for me."

Stingley grew up in a religious atmosphere in one of Chicago's tough neighborhoods, but since the injury, he says he has developed "a close, personal relationship with God."

"I had a tremendous will to make it back, but He really did it for me," Stingley said.

Over time, he reconciled the injury as a test of his personal faith, a trial of whether he could hold on and be strong... or succumb.

"I chose to be strong," he said. "And I chose not to be dormant." Once he was in constant pain

from the his daily therapeutic exercises. Now he works out less, concentrating mainly on his right hand and arm, trying to maintain strength and flexibility.

A nurse attends him daily, a friend/driver takes him around town in a modified van. Winters are his worst time, because the cold and wet makes him more vulnerable to illness and makes it more difficult to travel. Come spring, he bolts from the apartment. He likes to go to games of the Chicago Bulls and Chicago Cubs, attend concerts, eat out and do whatever his limited stamina will allow.

He has flown to London in the Concorde, has been to a Super Bowl game as a guest of Vice-President George Bush, and has gone to New England to be honored by the Patriots. Muhammad Ali had Stingley at his Deer Lake, Pa., training camp before his losing fight with Larry Holmes, hoping to draw inspiration from Stingley's personal triumphs.

Stingley takes vacations—Hawaii was very relaxing, he said—makes speeches and does voluntary work for charities. Just recently, he was honorary chairman of the Special Olympics in Washington. The awards and honors he has received the past 10 years fill his apartment office to overflowing.

"My injury caused so much pain to my family and to everyone around me that I felt I had to show them it was not as bad as it seemed, that I could live with it," Stingley said. "When the doctor told me about possibly not living much longer, and then I had movement in my right arm, I decided that there was no limit to how far I could come back."

"Stevie Wonder (who is blind) is one of my inspirations. He told me once that we both are part of God's army. I dedicated my life to serving others, to do what I can to ease other's pain."

His own financial pains were eased by an out-of-court settlement with the National Football League and the Patriots that avoided a lawsuit. Under the agreement, Stingley receives undisclosed monthly payments, covering his living costs, for the rest of his life. His medical bills are also covered, plus the costs of his sons' college educations.

The NFL owners, through the prodding of Pittsburgh's Art Rooney, set up a trust fund that provides Stingley with additional money. The Patriots named him executive director of player personnel, but he couldn't handle the traveling, so now he serves more as a public relations arm of the club.

"There is a remarkable serenity in Darryl's life," said his attorney, Jack Sands. "No question in my mind he is a far stronger person now in all aspects of his life. Quadriplegics have a history of peaks and valleys but over the years he has increased the distance between the peaks and valleys. He has changed remarkably in 10

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years."

Ten years ago, he was 30 pounds heavier but not nearly as handsome. His face is thinner, more mature, wiser. His hair is pulled back, matted down but carefully groomed. He talks confidently, easily. Perhaps the hardest problem he faces, besides the obvious physical handicaps, is to convince listeners he has adjusted to his paralysis and is a happy man.

"I wouldn't call this a normal life," he said. "I'd call it a charmed life."

"Any fool knows that when you hit someone with your best shot and he is still able to think, then you're not a hitter. My idea of a good hit is when the victim wakes up on the sidelines with train whistles blowing in his head and wondering who he is and what ran over him."

—"They Call Me Assassin"

Friends say that Jack Tatum changed after that night 10 years ago in Oakland. Always quiet, a loner by nature, he became more withdrawn, even somber, though he rarely talked about the play. Certainly his career was affected by the tackle. A three-time Pro Bowler prior to the 1978 season, one of the defensive anchors of the mighty Raiders, he was never an all-star again.

"He felt responsible and he felt badly," said Tony DeCello, Tatum's representative. "I know it bothered Jack a great deal through the years. We used to talk about it a lot. He just could not believe that the kid (Stingley) was a quadriplegic because of what happened."

Tatum now lives in Oakland with his wife and new baby. He'll be 40 in November and, as DeCello put it, "he's looking for employment" after being involved with Clarence Davis, a former teammate, in an unsuccessful sunglasses business. He is as private as ever, declining three times to talk to THE SPORTING NEWS about Stingley, about the play, about his life since that night.

Seven years ago, Tatum retired from pro football after nine seasons with Oakland and one with the Houston Oilers. He left with his image intact: the brooding tough guy, afraid of no one, anxious to wreak havoc on the enemy, the epitome of what it means to be a physical player.

Steelers Coach Chuck Noll once charged that Tatum was part of the league's "criminal element." Tatum perpetuated the image when he wrote "They Call Me Assassin," a stunning portrayal of a man bragging about inflicting as much pain as he could on opposing players.

When "They Call Me Assassin" was published, it reopened wounds within the Stingley camp. In the book, Tatum expressed regret about the incident, but also blamed it on the Raiders' Al Davis for demanding he be a "paid assassin." Stingley wanted Commissioner Pete Rozelle to punish Tatum for statements in the book. Rozelle declined.

Tatum was never suspended or fined for that vicious tackle. But what bothers Stingley more is that Tatum has neither talked to him nor written to him about the injury. Never.

"As far as I know, he never tried to get in touch with me," said Stingley. "They tell me he tried to come to the hospital and they didn't let

him in, but I don't believe it for a minute. Why hasn't he talked to me? Life goes on, it should be behind him. It happened to me, not him. I can live with it, why can't he?"

But DeCello says Tatum wanted to meet with Stingley. He says Tatum decided to visit the hospital immediately. But to avoid any disruptive incidents, DeCello got in touch with Sands, Stingley's attorney, and one of Stingley's relatives.

"I talked to both and I was told by both of them not to have Jack show up," said DeCello. "They didn't want to see him. They absolutely refused to see him."

nobody ever told him."

Sands says he doesn't remember any request by the Tatum side to see Stingley in the hospital. "They did call about a charity function but it was around the time Tatum's book came out and Darryl and I both thought it was a cheap publicity stunt," said Sands. "What would be the point of a meeting between them? They are the product of two different environments. It was 10 years ago. Time moves on."

"When the reality of Stingley's injury hit me with its full impact, I was shattered. To think that my tackle broke another man's neck and killed his future . . . well, I

"Darryl Jr. was affected most by my injury because he was old enough to understand," said Stingley. "He was 9 when it happened and he always had problems with grades and stuff like that. But we always attributed the slow progress to the accident."

"Derek is a bit more like myself when I was a kid. He made the all-city team as a junior and is a center fielder with major league potential. He's an A student and he really wants to go to college and do something with his life. Darryl Jr. is between jobs. He hasn't decided where he wants to continue his education."

my oats" period, staying out very late, partying, socializing, doing anything to ease his emotional pain. But Tina finally came back. "We both found what we had was the best," he said. They now are grandparents to Darryl Jr.'s two children.

Having his personal life more settled is especially important to Stingley because he is not sure how long he will live.

"I am grateful for every year and every day and every minute and every hour that I am alive since that day, because I am living on borrowed time," he said. "Next to death, this may be the most traumatizing thing that can happen. But I still can feel, taste, smell, hear, talk. I experience life just like everyone else, maybe just more intensely. It's like being a midget or something. The simple and small and trivial become very big."

"But I won't give in. If a restaurant doesn't have a ramp, we find a way to get in anyway. We lift the chair if we have to. It's that competitive spirit in me."

For a long time after the accident, Stingley was an angry young man. He fought rehabilitation attempts, yelled at nurses, argued with doctors. "Now he is at peace with himself," said Sands.

In medical terms, Stingley's condition is stable. He says he has feelings from his toes to the top of his head. And maybe some day, just maybe, he might walk again.

"It amazes the doctors I can have so much feeling in my body," he said. "That's encouraging. From some of the things they are doing now regarding spinal cord injuries, well, I am not approaching this situation passively at all."

"I chose not to get frustrated. There is a part of me every day that is making plans to get back. If I am going to walk again, I am going to put everything into this that I have in me."

"As a warrior, I must discourage running backs and receivers whenever they attempt to gain yardage . . . It is a physical and a violent job, and quite often the end results are knockouts or serious injuries to my opponent. But it is just part of a very risky business."

—"They Call Me Assassin"

You try to project what it would be like to be Darryl Stingley, in that wheelchair, so dependent on the goodwill of others. And you wonder if, after a while, suicide might not be an option.

Stingley tells a story about his own suicide thoughts. One day, a few years after the injury, he was talking with Mark Mulvoy, who helped write Stingley's autobiography, "Happy To Be Alive." The two men were sitting in a Chicago hotel room when Stingley casually mentioned how easy it would be "to push the button on my chair and just crash through the window and get it over with."

Stingley laughs when he recounts the tale. "They tell me that Mark left the room and instead of hailing a cab, he went directly to the bar and had a few. It really shook him up."

"For so long, no one knew what was on my mind. They didn't know if I could cope with my situation. It took everyone a long time to realize I wasn't losing it. I was having too much trouble figuring out how I was going to do all the little things

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Cut Your Beard. Not Your Face.

See pages 26 and 27.

DeCello says he eventually called Sands again, and told him Tatum wanted to put on a benefit with the help of other players to raise money for Stingley. Again, Sands turned him down, as did the Patriots, who told him he had to work through Stingley's representatives.

"Sands was absolutely belligerent," said DeCello. "He said without any qualification that they didn't want to have anything to do with me or Jack Tatum or anybody associated with us. And that's how the whole thing ended."

"Maybe Stingley never knew we did try to do those things. Maybe

know it hurts Darryl, but it hurts me, too."

—"They Call Me Assassin"

During the roughest times after the injury, Darryl Stingley found himself saying the same prayer over and over: "Lord, if it's your will, please let me live to see my sons grow."

Stingley has lived and the boys have grown and become a focus of Stingley's life.

The boys were born when Stingley and Tina were Chicago teenagers. Darryl Jr. now is 19 and Derek is 17. To the family, Darryl Jr. was known as Hank, because his father worshiped Hank Aaron.

And, yes, Stingley would have loved to see either son play football. Maybe it's because he still misses the locker rooms and training camp and the camaraderie among his teammates. But Darryl Jr. liked basketball better and Derek chose baseball.

"Naturally, I wanted to see them out there playing football," Stingley said. "What happened to me was a one-in-a-million thing. I love the game and I have no regrets about having played it."

The sons live with their grandmother, on the west side of Chicago. For a while, when Tina left, Stingley went through a "sowing

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to worry about the big things."

There's something else about that book on Stingley's life. It contains the daily hospital bulletins issued about his precarious condition. Even now, Stingley can't read those reports. He can talk about everything else surrounding the play and its aftermath, but not

those bulletins. Somehow, they bring what happened to him too close to home.

He would much rather talk about what he calls "the heroes" who have touched his life since that August night. John Madden, coach of the Raiders in 1978, was among the first to visit Stingley in the hospital. Madden was there when the machine that was removing phlegm from Stingley's mouth malfunctioned.

Madden yelled and yelled until the nurses fixed the problem.

"If he hadn't been there, I might have choked to death," said Stingley. "I can't say enough about John Madden."

Stingley doesn't know that Madden called the Raiders together after the injury and told them: "From now on, this guy is one of us."

A few years ago, a fire started in

an apartment near Stingley's. He was alone, in the bedroom, and was nearly overcome by smoke before a friend, Glenn Franklin, rescued him. Franklin, too, is a hero.

"I hear the cynics say there are no compassionate people left, but these wonderful people keep popping up whenever I am in need," said Stingley.

But occasionally, moments of depression eat through even this shell

of optimism. The worst come when Stingley goes through his list of "what ifs?"

What if the pass had been thrown sooner? What if he hadn't tried so hard to catch an uncatchable pass? What if the coaches hadn't chewed him out the year before for letting a similar pass go unchallenged, something he remembered that night in Oakland?

And what about the fatigue he felt on that pass pattern? He had run a reverse two plays before, "going 50 yards to gain 30," and he finally had signaled the bench that he wanted to come out. But as he ran off the field, they waved him back in. What if he had been more strong-willed and left anyway?

And what if Tatum had gone for the interception instead of Stingley's head?

"All the players understand that it is a violent game. I understood that. I assumed the risk just like everybody else did," he said, searching to find the right words. "But it is those exceptions to the rules, people who take that one step beyond, the people who get excessive in an already violent game—there shouldn't be a place for them. They don't help the game, they don't help their teams win games. They call it intimidation. No one intimidated me."

"If I'd had time to look at him (Tatum) and he'd had time to look at me, he could have avoided me. But he chose not to. What he did to me had nothing to do with football being a violent game. It was him as a person, nothing more."

"I don't know what the public wants. What is the fan demanding? Look at hockey. It worries me. I remember when I went back to a Patriots game for the first time (in 1979). They cheered and cheered for me, and I was moved. A few days later, a youngster was standing on a corner in Boston and some kid shot him. He picked up a bullet in the neck and was paralyzed. If the people felt something for me that day, why didn't they go home and teach their children some compassion and respect for life?"

He tries to feel compassion even for Tatum, the "assassin." After a decade, these two men should be at rest, but they aren't. Stingley wonders why his adversary couldn't be contrite, and Tatum, wanting so badly to be remembered for his considerable skills, knows that one savage tackle has blotted out his achievements.

"If I stood around and cursed him and wished I could find him and cause him bodily harm, then everything I would look at would be hatred," Stingley explained. "But because of what is in my heart, because of my prayers, I was able to lean on God, be positive, go on. I've tried to move to higher ground."

He moved his right hand slowly across his face. He sat erect in the chair, his arms held firmly by his braces. The people at the rehabilitation center praise him because his posture is good and he wears those braces daily. They say he sets a good example for others undergoing therapy. He's proud of that role.

"When I stopped asking 'why?' is when I started living again, when I started doing," Stingley said softly. "I know I have a cross to bear and Tatum does, too. But maybe his is a little bit heavier than mine."

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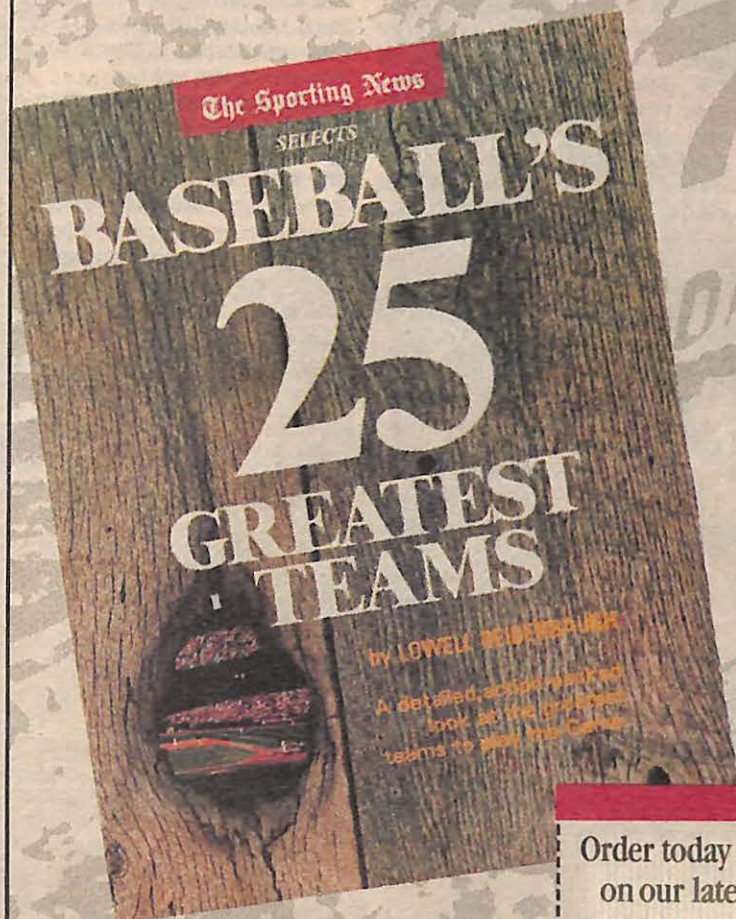
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